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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000151

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: OIL SPILL CLOSES PORT SALALAH FOR 48 HOURS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.
Reason: 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Three tons of oil spilled into the port of Salalah January 18 after a routine bunkering operation went awry. The immediate cause of the accident appears to be human error aboard the "Maersk Greenwich." Based on preliminary information regarding the actions taken by Port Salalah and the Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment and Water Resources (MRMEWR), it appears the contaminated vessel was allowed to move away from its position within the protection of the jetty and into the open water of the anchorage area, allowing oil to spread onto a nearby beach. The port is currently 75 percent operational with 3 berths up and running. Available resources appeared to have been limited as local fishing dinghies were asked to assist while a cleaning crew from the United Arab Emirates made its way to the scene. END SUMMARY.

HUMAN ERROR

2. (SBU) Initial reports of an oil spill that occurred at Port Salalah January 17 suggest that after an engineer stepped away from the control room aboard the "Maersk Greenwich," three tons of fuel oil spilled into the port as the vessel's fifth tank reached full capacity during a routine bunkering operation. The engineer has since been released from employment with Maersk.

3. (SBU) According to port officials, the ship was immediately detained and prevented from leaving while protective booms were put up around the port to contain the spread of oil from the ship's deck and hull. This was immediately followed by a full closure (for 48 hours) of the port, causing some ships to be delayed in the anchorage area just outside the jetty or be diverted to other ports in region.

4. (U) A task force was set up by Sulaiman bin Mohammed al-Busaidi, Superintendent General of Pollution Control at the MRMEWR. The coalition brought together the capabilities of several government agencies, including the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the Royal Oman Police Coast Guard, and Salalah Port Services. Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) contributed 50 boxes of absorbent material by the end of the second night. In addition, international assistance was requested from the Spill Response Company in the UAE in order to contain the spill and expedite remediation. The company crew arrived January 20, with their equipment following via road a few hours later. In the meantime, several reports suggest that local fisherman were enlisted to aid cleanup efforts.

QUESTIONS ABOUT RESPONSE

5. (C) According to one official at Salalah Port Services (SPS), an Omani joint venture with Danish-owned A.P. Moller-Maersk Group responsible for managing Port Salalah, the cleanup proved to be a "perfect scenario in which the port, ministries and private sector worked flawlessly." Officials from an agent representing one of the affected ships disagreed with this assessment, however, saying that the port mistakenly let the contaminated ship move from its position within the jetty into the outlying anchoring area in open water, thereby spreading the spill and causing contamination of a nearby beach. An official from the MRMEWR says that in order to clean the affected area with dispersant (not recommended for use in depths less than 25 meters), the contaminated ship had to be moved. It was during the ship's movement that churning caused additional oil hidden in the jetty to appear.

6. (SBU) The "Maersk Greenwich" was permitted by the MRMEWR

on January 18 to leave port upon receipt of a guarantee of payment (estimated by one source to be approximately USD 400,000) for all clean-up costs by its acting agent in Oman. Other vessels contaminated by the spill were cleaned in port before departure. (Note: Vessels contaminated with oil face stiff penalties and can even be barred from entering other ports. END NOTE.)

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

17. (SBU) As of January 26, three of Salalah's four berths are open for business and the port is operating at almost full-volume capacity. A representative of Port Salalah said that while business was lost during the closure, they expect the spill to have no material bearing on their earnings this year.

COMMENT

18. (C) While officials at the Port of Salalah contend that the spill was handled within standard operating procedures and that no oil escaped from the immediate port, other officials argue that poor decisions taken during the event illustrate the need for improvements if Port Salalah seeks to attract more business from bunkering services. As one official summarized, "Reaction time was slow and resources were inadequate."
BALTIMORE